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“Sometimes I Wish the Sun Would Just Explode:” Squidbillies, the Animated Hillbilly, and the Cultural Myth of Appalachia

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I am a senior English major with a minor in Appalachian Studies from Montgomery County, Kentucky. I am also a senior Fellow in the Gaines Center for the Humanities at UK.

This research project is simultaneously an excerpt from my Gaines senior thesis project and an altered version of my 2007 Edward T. Breathitt Lecture. As an Eastern Kentuckian, an aspiring scholar, and a cartoon fiend, my thesis project is entirely fitting: “The Drawn and Quartered Appalachian: The Image of the Cartoon Hillbilly in Animation.” I find “Squidbillies,” and all other Adult Swim cartoon offerings, to be intriguing and entertaining. After watching the initial episodes, I was inspired to involve Early Cuyler in my research; if nothing else, it gives me the opportunity to employ new and fun obscenities in formal, scholarly writing.

Early in my career in the English department, my focus was creative writing. As I progressed and began study the subject of Appalachia, I was pushed out of my area of comfort and forced to write more formally. My faculty sponsors were terrific aids in this endeavor. Learning a new mode of writing has been a challenge, but a wholly rewarding one.

As for my post-graduate plans, I will be conducting an experiment entitled, “Seeing How Far an English Degree From the University of Kentucky Will Get Me in the World.” I will also be a fellow and intern in Berlin, Germany, with Humanity in Action, a program that focuses on minority rights research and activism, next year.



Faculty Mentor:
Lisa Broome-Price, Ph.D., Interim Director, Gaines Center for the Humanities

Kayla Rae Whitaker’s lecture explores the image of the hillbilly in 21st-century animation as representative of a contested new Appalachian myth. She surveys the history of the hillbilly icon from late 19th- and early 20th-century depictions of the mountaineer both as a cheerful rustic and as an extremely poor “other” to the white, middle-class Americans, providing a useful context in which to examine the present-day image of the hillbilly provided by television shows such as *Squidbillies*, the jewel in the animated Adult Swim crown of Cartoon Network. Whitaker shows that, rather than simply updating the image of the hillbilly by adopting the lexicon of the New South — in which Nascar attire and crystal meth replace overalls and moonshine — *Squidbillies* presents a hybrid signifier of regional pride and oppositional culture. By featuring a mixed family of squids and humans

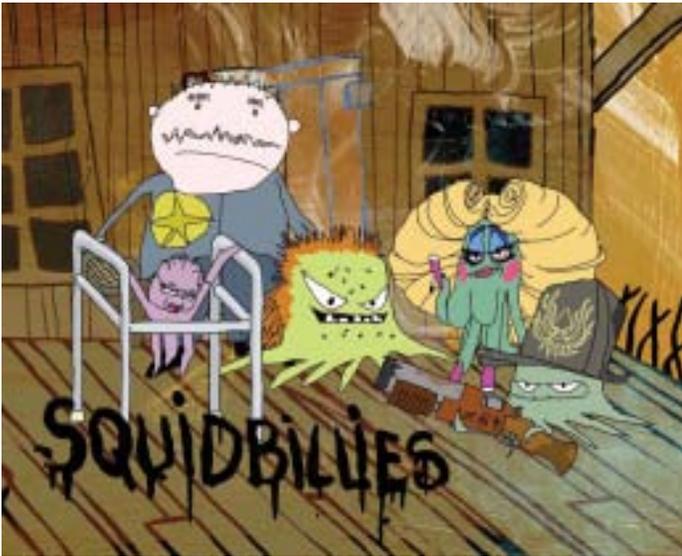
“Sometimes I Wish the Sun Would Just Explode:” Squidbillies, the Animated Hillbilly, and the Cultural Myth of Appalachia

Excerpt from a Gaines Thesis

as its hillbilly protagonists, Whitaker argues, the animated show claims allegiance to the tradition of animation in which animals such as Bugs Bunny regularly interact with humans (viz., Warner Bros.’ 1950 cartoon, *Hillbilly Hare*), but also heightens the absurdity of the visual narrative in a particularly self-reflexive, satirical way, thus challenging facile consumption of any aspect of the Appalachian stereotype.

The argument of Whitaker’s lecture is drawn from her superbly researched undergraduate thesis on the wider topic of representations of Appalachia. She delivered the thirteenth annual Breathitt Undergraduate Lecture in the Humanities on January 24, 2007, having been selected for the lectureship in a competitive application process. The Breathitt Undergraduate Lectureship competition is sponsored by the Gaines Center for the Humanities, and is open to all UK undergraduates. Faculty members Dwight Billings, Tom Marksbury, Shauna Scott, and Karen Tice also mentored Whitaker as she researched this subject.

[**Editor’s note:** the following is the text of Ms. Whitaker’s 2007 Edward T. Breathitt Lecture. During that lecture, she showed the audience various videos and still images of cartoon representations of Appalachia and Appalachians. For various reasons, including copyright considerations, those visuals are not included with this article, although references to them are retained in the text.]



SQUIDBILLIES and all related characters and elements are trademarks of and ©2008 Cartoon Network.

For the purposes of this discussion, the first hillbilly image appeared directly after the turn of the past century, a time during which a deluge of print media informed the nation of the forgotten Appalachia, a region removed from greater middle American society. This rugged terrain, enclosed by the intimidating heights of the Appalachian mountain chain, was purported to host the country's "modern ancestor," direct descendents of the frontiersmen who first navigated the wilderness of the Cumberland Gap to colonize the American west. Appalachians were seen as the product of a fine, Anglo-Saxon bloodline, naturally inclined to enterprise, adventure, and a specifically American sense of Manifest Destiny. They were, in essence, viewed by many to be the purest Americans, wresting a natural way of life from a stubborn soil, triumphing over the will of a nature bent on dominating its inhabitant. It was the romance of this depiction that attracted the attention of many — romance, and the prospect of a way of life worthy of myth. Appalachia was, for many, just distant enough from the sources of mainstream media to provide the benefit of the doubt as to whether any part of the south could remain so antiquated. The reader would not know to correct the myth, to disbelieve the stories told.

However, it was difficult to fictionalize the facts of Appalachian poverty, and evidence of the region's genuine economic struggles. Media coverage of these difficulties, and the individuals involved, then diverged into two clear perspectives. Many sources provided a benign depiction of Appalachia. In the nineteen teens Berea College president William Goodell Frost, whose plea to the Northeastern bourgeoisie for donations needed to civilize and uplift the impoverished, protestant, whites of the mountains, helped to establish a depiction of the gentle, folksy, naive Appalachian, motivation that critic Allen Batteau (1990) argues "transfixed an affluent society and sent legions of poverty warriors into the hills."

For each benign fiction of the Appalachian, there were several sinister counterexamples intended as catalysts for, or results of, fear. Notable were the novels of John Fox, Jr., including *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come* and *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, a narrative in which the fury of eastern Kentucky natives amidst a feud is violently directed at one another and at well-meaning lowlanders. As local color genre writings began to appear in such middle-class publications as *Harper's* and *Cosmopolitan*, Fox's depictions of mountaineers set a standard for strangeness and threat. The natives of Fox's narratives were feral, distrustful of outsiders, and uneducated, blessed only with the native intelligence men often attribute to the instincts of animals. Fox's novels quickly became part of an American canon, evidence that wilderness and people of the wild yet existed in this country, and that they existed in Appalachia. The stories officially crossed the line between fiction and testament when Fox found his own work being paraphrased by both the *New York Times* and the *Louisville Courier-Journal* during the 1931 Harlan Miners' Strike, a bloodbath largely motivated by commerce and orchestrated by northern coal conglomerates. Not only had Fox's novels served as a primer of Appalachia, they had officially become news and, beyond that, history.

The wave of coverage concerning the Harlan Miners Strike coincided with the onslaught of the Great Depression, granting these depictions a disturbing indication of intent on behalf of publishers. Critic Anthony Harkins (2004) argues that "this reconceptualization was one result of a much broader struggle over the nature of modern America that was part of the shift from a country grounded in localized commerce and social relations to one characterized by a mass production and consumption." Appalachia represented, then, both nostalgia for the self-sufficiency of the agrarian life and the fear of economic collapse that had made an example of the south in the post Civil War era. A nation teetering on the cusp of poverty developed a fear of destitution. Fear and its brethren, abhorrence, quickly developed. The form had been established, and now all that would complete the illustration of the hillbilly was supplied.

As an object of fear and fun, the region became a myth, a symbol "serving both as a microcosm and a distorting mirror of broader American society" (Harkins, 2004, p. 125). Appalachia was simultaneously more American than America, yet considered a sort of third world country, seemingly, on the other side of Lexington, on the other side of Nashville, on the other side of Cincinnati. Appalachia gave a face and a location to America's fear of poverty. The existence of the symbol gave license to the widespread desire to blame poverty on the impoverished. Batteau contends that "Appalachian poverty was not so easy to dismiss. It was systemic, among people of the highest character and Anglo-Saxon ancestry, and associate with ... the nation's pioneering heritage and traditions of rugged individualism" (Batteau, 1990, p. 6).

Integral to sustaining middle America's faith in its own abilities to survive in the global economy was the creation of token divergences clearly delineating the "us" from the "them." Poverty became less a static term and more a very specific state of being, inhabiting an entire spectrum of traits that became synonymous with, specifically, Appalachia and, less specifically, the American south. Misfortune and economic victimization, the copulated with the cartoon, if you will. Destitution in the sense of Appalachia now denoted slovenliness, ignorance, sexual depravity and strangeness, substance abuse, and a special hatred for outsiders, particularly

middle-class lowlanders now mired in economic dread. Why else would those of almost pure Caucasian, western-European lineage be at the mercy of such poor circumstance? Possible causes for this acquired disability were cited as the isolation of the mountains, mental degeneration due to incest, alcoholism, and often simple sloth. Mythical Appalachia became a tool to make a social syndrome seem safely distant, to paint an inaccurate picture of mountain poverty as the fault of the people. This was one perspective, however, to which, much later, came rebuttals.

The Hillbilly figure has been an indicator of American duress, a target and a catalyst for comic relief aimed at a white other. Illustrated media depicting the mountain hillbilly, a term initially understood as a reference to those residing in mountainous areas, but later applied as a blanket label to residents of all sub-regions of the rural south, experienced peaks in popularity and cultural use during both the Great Depression and the Vietnam War. One of the first mainstream presentations was Al Capp's wildly popular "Lil Abner." Debuting in 1934 and running in thousands of daily and weekly newspapers for the next forty-three years, the strip told the ongoing tale of the strapping Lil' Abner Yokum and the denizens of the town of Dogpatch. A sentimental manifestation of the myth, "Lil Abner" was later adapted into a successful stage musical and a feature length film.

More definitive was Paul Webb's classic strip "The Mountain Boys." Featured in the high brow periodical *Esquire* and directed toward an ostensibly urbane, metropolitan, male demographic, "Mountain Boys" is the cynic's "Lil Abner:" a visual rendering of the hillbilly gone shiftless and apathetic. Webb's strip was less quaint local color narrative and more a running gag, the primary end of which was marvel at the dense and feeble Appalachian. What would gradually become the predominant presentation of the hillbilly is derived from Webb's work: "the long squirrel rifle, to his whiskey jug, bare feet and slouched pose" (Harkins, 2004, p. 137). Webb's icon, a portrayal that presents the Appalachian as looking like a wizened Father Time figure, is prodded into poses of listlessness. Harkins maintains that illustrations of this variety, as well as the animation that followed, is a defense mechanism cloaked in bathroom jokes. "Cartoons mirrored the complex mix of emotions and attitudes of audiences," he argues, supplementing a bitter humor to the "daily reports" of "social collapse...(and) the plight of the rural south" (p. 103).

The Animated Hillbilly, seen in Betty Boop and her "Musical Mountaineers," owes much to Webb. This is, pardon the pun, the "drawn and quartered" Appalachian, who, in the words of Batteau, "stands on a stage, holding a script he did not write." However, this image owes just as much to a specific theory of poetics, and the power of things seen, as it does to the media and the times. While the representation itself — and the pursuit of examining the representations in the light of truth and accuracy — are important considerations, the appearance of the symbol itself may be essential to understanding an image's influence. Batteau offers insight into the significance of a simple drawing:

With rare exceptions, all of the commentary about the "invention" of Appalachia has taken place in a "myth vs. reality" frame of reference, seeing the former term as pernicious or falsifying ... there exists a small number of generative symbols that define Appalachia; with various recursions and inversions, these symbols can generate an infinite variety of texts ... one must understand

the poetic values of the image. This is why [highly influential works, such as *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* by Harry] Caudill and his epigone will continue to be read, while their critics, attacking a poetic text on grounds of semantic inaccuracy, will not ... Every reality is constituted by archetypes ... and the interesting question is not a contrast between myth and reality, but rather the hierarchies and intersections and namings of multiple realities.

For instance, Batteau continues, a few key symbols — a floppy straw hat, a jug of moonshine garishly labeled "XXX," a pipe, the lack of shoes, the presence of a pair of overalls or an overwhelmingly long beard —

share important qualities of poetry, such as condensation of meaning, sensuous appeal, and formal perfection. At bottom, *all consciousness is poetic*: all forms of seeing the world are derived from, refracted from, or prefigured by mythopoeic forms. Consciousness is a social production.

It can be told, it can be written, and it most certainly can be drawn. Those texts and performances that focus mass attention and condense several levels of meaning create the archetypes for other forms of consciousness. (Batteau, 1990, p. 8).

Society, in art, can be reconstructed. This variety of social production establishes, for the audience, a criterion of social expectations satisfied by the visual and the aural. This phenomenon of representation is intriguing when considering the art of animation: what we learn when we, presumably in pajamas, armed with a bowl of Captain Crunch cereal, and a host of cultural prejudices, watch Saturday morning cartoons. Animation is a realm of representation in which reality is literally redesigned — each facet is a vessel with the ability to be transformed — in order to emphasize, or eradicate, crucial characteristics of any landscape and any people. Those details deemed unimportant or of ill use are removed. Not only is the world redrawn, it is reanimated to order, designed to walk and talk in a way to serve any given purpose, displaying what animation scholar Michael Barrier (1999) dubs "the always tenuous link between design and politics" (p. 532). In this way, animated cartooning is the ideal medium for abetting or abating social fear. The true pulse of the people, then, is reflected in fun — in the genres of entertainment, which, when taken at face value, are presumed to be frivolous, unstudied, cheaply obtained.



(In a drably water colored landscape, what appears to be a tentacle reaches out to adjust the dial on an AM radio sitting atop an ashtray littered with cigarette butts. A plaintive country song begins to play:

*“My dreams are all dead and buried./
Sometimes I wish the sun would just explode./
When God comes and calls me to his kingdom/
I’ll take all you sons of bitches when I go.”*

The tentacle reaches into a bag of chewing tobacco, and a plug of it is placed into a sparsely-toothed mouth. The same tentacle loads a rifle and places it into a gun rack. A rearview mirror is adjusted to reveal a set of steely, narrowed eyes. As a tentacle is thrust upon a novelty foot-shaped gas pedal, the truck moves into motion. The camera pans out. Our hero, a blue squid, sits behind the wheel of a pickup truck in the midst of a junkyard, elbow cocked out the window, while a yellow squid jostles the bumper, simulating the motion of drive.)

This is the opening scene of *Squidbillies*, a contemporary and defining component of Adult Swim, the Cartoon Network’s successful Sunday night adult animation showcase. The title is a reference to both the chief representative of Appalachian culture in the popular imagination, the iconic hillbilly, and the presumed intention on behalf of the show’s creators to skewer this icon by redesigning it as a squid. First airing in October, 2005, *Squidbillies* is a sophisticated compilation of images canonical of the new south; while its predecessors are wholly defining and influential, it seems inaccurate to describe the show as an updated depiction of objectification. *Squidbillies* may well be an original account of a Benighted South that takes for credence the old adage, “Brevity is the soul of wit.”

Token symbols of southern degeneration such as incarceration, substance abuse, and rampant unemployment are juxtaposed by an absurdity, in both the show’s narrative and appearance, never before seen in the animated Appalachia. The myth as presented by *Squidbillies* ceases to offer even a remote possibility for realism, or being mistaken for realism; it becomes its own reality, reflexive to its own image in the popular culture and to its own ludicrous implications. This composition of stereotypes is mottled by an embellishment so great it acquires the nature of satire. The Appalachian myth, in *Squidbillies*, is hijacked and held for ransom.

For the purposes of this discussion, the term “adult animation” will refer to a genre of cartooning that in no way purports to cater to a juvenile audience, often operating on the intent of parody or satire, and including material and language not suitable for daytime viewing slots, explaining its 10:00 pm cable placement.

Squidbillies creators Jim Fortier and Dave Willis are natives of the same area of Northern Georgia in which the *Squidbillies* live. Together, they host a writing staff composed largely of natives of Georgia, North Carolina, and northern Florida. This is a common occurrence at Williams Street, the Atlanta-based production company where this show, along with other cult favorites such as *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* and *The Venture Brothers* are written. Admitting that “an esoteric perspective of the south — generally a standard comedic troupe” is “embedded in the show’s absurdity,” *Squidbillies* “transcends the banal redneck jokes long wielded by standup comics” (Huang, 2006, p. 1). On their website (www.adultswim.com), Adult Swim provides a synopsis of the show’s plot:

A family of inbred squids tears the ass out of all creation in the North Georgia Mountains. It’s not all drinking, brawling, and reckless gunplay. Occasionally, they use crossbows. There’s also hate, love, sex, a multinational drywall conglomerate, cockfighting, the penal system, and a deep-seated mistrust of authority and all things different.

Huang supplements this premise with a geographic insight: “Five million years ago, the Atlantic Ocean covered North America all the way to the Ohio Valley. As the ocean receded to form our present-day geography, a family of squids was stranded in a remote setting in the North Georgia mountains.” The Cuylers have become *Squidbillies* by proxy; Appalachia was cultivated around them and without them.

The narrative begins fifteen years ago, when a young squid named Early Cuyler falls prey to a forbidden love — a grossly obese woman named Krystal, who lives in a junkyard where she perpetually reclines on a mattress. Early Cuyler, who is fond of both “brown party liquor” and trucker hats (that read, in varying episodes, a logo promoting country musician David Allan Coe, an emblem of a woman surrounded by a bulls eye that reads “Booty Hunter,” and the statement “Breathe If You’re Horny!”) falls in love with Krystal. She demands that he produce “one of them tape cassette player thingies” before they consummate their love, or, in the words of Krystal, “touch her front butt.”

Early holds up a convenience store in order to obtain said item, and is successful in doing so. While the cross-species romance of Early and Krystal will not last, they will conceive a son, Rusty, unbeknownst to Early. It is here that we are introduced to the Cuyler family unit, which attempts to care for young Rusty after Early is inevitably sent to the Georgia state penitentiary for his second convenience store holdup in which he attempted to obtain both money and a "Bad Company" cassette tape for Krystal's tape player. Early spends the following fifteen years in the Georgia state penitentiary, during which time his son Rusty is born, abandoned, and taken into the custody of various family members, all of whom prove unsuitable guardians for him. He is eventually raised by wolves until his father is released from custody and the family is reunited.

The extended family unit with whom Early and Rusty live is non-traditional and spans multiple generations. Granny is a small purple squid, so small she hangs from the handles of a walker. She is a veritable tome of a "home-spun," if incomprehensible, Appalachian history:

When I was a girl, we used to make catsup in the backyard out of possum tails, only we just called it blood ... I remember when Jesus was president, he used to eat babies. Or was it Satan who ate babies? Anyway, one of them ate babies." (*Squidbillies* #101).

The family matriarch is Early's sister Lil. A weathered woman-squid, Lil smokes "high-tar slims," garnishes meticulously manicured fingernails, and operates her own business, a beauty salon cum boiled peanut-ery cum meth lab.

The crux of *Squidbillies* is the family's attempts to exist after this reunion. The primary focus is the burgeoning relationship between Early and his son following Early's stint in prison, and Early's repeated attempts to "learn" his son the practices of manhood. The narrator comments that "There is nothing on this earth more stupid than the love of an uneducated squid for his illegitimate son." (*Squidbillies* #102). Accordingly, Early and Rusty's bonding occurs over the teaching of Rusty how to drive (that involves Rusty crashing, again and again, a stolen Trans Am into a tree while Early encourages him, "Hell, do it again!" and how to dress as a trick-or-treater while attempting to rob homeowners.)

The Cuylers reside in what appears to be a two-room shack, unencumbered by neighbors and set in the midst of tall pines and car parts. A requisite front porch serves as stage for much of the family's interaction. Pivotal to the plot are the exploits of Early Cuyler, who is restrained by neither decorum nor the restrictions of his parole agreement. Like the hillbred hero of a John Fox, Jr., novel, Early, in the words of Harkins (2004), "represents the antilite attitudes, rugged independence and physical prowess of the myth frontiersmen epitomized by Crockett and Boone ... the theme of rebellion against class pretension is unmistakable" (p. 117). Early roughly emulates a sentimental depiction of Appalachian independence as he "rides around town, just a hollerin" in his beloved "truck boat truck — two trucks, sandwiched in a boat." Tempered by the virtues and pratfalls of the myth, he is independent from pretension and reason alike. Much of the show's humor is derived from the absurdity of his antics: brainless, bold, and riddled with obscenities. With a single tentacle, Early grasps a myth of Appalachian manhood and rams it into the ground.

In many ways Early follows a formula familiar to the myth. He hosts an array of unabashed and fervent prejudices. A departure from the traditional assumption of regional prejudice, however, is Early's hatred for

white people, whom he calls "honkys" or "chalkys." He further displays his discriminatory bent by holding a bonfire ceremony in the family's backyard, chanting while Granny, clothed in a ceremonial robe, throws the "white man's money" into the flames. There are many ways to read this: for Early, this could be further defiance of authority, a reference to the Caucasian patriarchs who originally penned the myth of Appalachia.

Early interviews for jobs in his "formal attire" (a denim trucker hat that reads, "GROOM") and writes his resume, in which he paraphrases Hank Williams, Jr., on another trucker hat. "I read," says local entrepreneur Dan Halen in the episode "Office Politics Trouble," "from your, ah, hat-shaped resume, that you can skin a buck, run a trout line, and —"

"All my rowdy friends are comin over tonight, yessir" (*Squidbillies* #102, "Take This Job and Love It").

Among Early's more noticeable characteristics is his unabashed host of prejudices, be they based upon race, gender, or technologic advancement. When asked of his work ethic, Cuyler replies, "I don't think ethnics do no work, that's they problem. If you ain't like me, go hang from a damn tree." During a job interview, he also urinates on the laptop computer of a potential employer, explaining, "I don't care to consort with those of the robot race" (*Squidbillies* #102).

In one episode he even purchases a hog lagoon, a manifestation of corporate farming specific not to Georgia, but to North Carolina. "Son," he tells Rusty, "usury is that which allows the little man to have what he desires. This is the grandest damn day of my life ... why, I feel like Travis Tritt, a-struttin my fine self on down to Floridy." Early attempts to purchase said hog lagoon with "magic beans," exclaiming "Through Jesus' gift of financery, we gonna own this here land outright." He eventually turns to Lil for his mortgage payments. Lil obtains the funds through meth sales, or what Early calls "bathtub crank."

Lil enters the local gas station for "bathtub crank" supplies.

L: Hey darlin, lemme have a carton of them high-tar slims ... this trans am keychain ... and all the Nasafed you got back there. (Pause) The blister packs.

S: You must have quite a cold there, Lil, wantin all that Nasafed and all.

L: Got a tickle in m'throat.

S: Seems like you got a tickle in your throat bout every two weeks, don't it?

L: (Pause) What's your point?

Rusty later questions the moral rightness of meth sales, displaying the show's awareness of the characters' often illegal lifestyle.

R: Daddy, is that Crystal methamphetamine?

E: "Yeah."

R: "Ain't that illegal?"

E: "Look here, son, it ain't like we're buyin it. That's wrong. We just make it and sell it. (Pause.) And take it." (*Squidbillies* #203, "Meth O.D").

Specific to the show's plot is location. The county in which the *Squidbillies* reside is located in Northern Georgia, roughly two hours from metropolitan Atlanta, in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.

Welcome to paradise: a heavenly strip of nature in the North Georgia mountains. Until the damn Indians moved in. Then the settlers, then that one black family which sent everyone to the suburbs. Fortunately, it was later gentrified by gay fur trappers, who were later wiped out by the massive Gloggopuff. Then strip mines and quarries raped the land, leaving a crater that was just begging to be used as a nuclear testing site, which paved the way ultimately for Captain Kookie's Family Style Fun Time Pizza Palace and Nudist Hog Waste Lagoon Family Resort for Lesbians Only. It didn't last a year.

This descriptive specificity defies the traditional habit of designing "blanket gags" about a homogeneous south. Harkins (2004) argues that this phenomenon among illustrators and writers is used "to better define their subject as a people caught forever in the past, they underplayed or, more often, simply ignored the racial, social and economic heterogeneity of the region ... to present all southern mountain people and locales as interchangeable ... cartoonists and filmmakers soon embraced this conflation of all southern mountain regions into a single mythic space" (p. 121). The New Myth, like the old, remains defined by its dissimilarities with the "rest of America." What were once defining characteristics have spun into a blanket definition of regional "weirdness." Unlike Cletus the Slack-Jawed Yokel, the token hillbilly of the *The Simpsons*, who seems to occupy a south just outside of the middle American Springfield, the *Squidbillies* are distinctive characters in a distinct location in time.

It is important to note that *Squidbillies* does make a case for its master-symbol nature, or as Batteau (1990) argues, "the wilderness ... presented time and again as a spectacle, a backdrop to the human action of the mountains, and ultimately a participant in that

action." However, this master-symbol is updated to include environmental exploitation as a silent, additional character. One of the clearest divergences the new myth of Appalachia takes from its predecessor is its intricate ties to the corporate economy. No longer, as Harkins (2004) argues, "outside of the larger economic nexus beyond the immediate borders of their 'hollers,' the denizens of the new myth are immersed in industrialism and commercialism."

The community in which the Cuylers live is dominated by Dan Halen Sheetrock. Not accidentally aurally similar in name to Van Halen, the popular (and highly commercialized) 1980s rock group, Dan Halen Sheetrock represents outside America's corporate mark on a region widely suspected as isolated from the greater society. A firm easily comparable with the JH Blair coal empire of 1930s Harlan County, CEO Dan Halen owns most of the Cuylers' community. Early is eventually employed by Dan Halen, solidifying his tie, for better or worse, with the outside market.

In his own right, Early has an entrepreneurial spirit that clashes with his less vigorous traits; he wants to make as much money as possible while expending the least energy possible, and he wants to do so outside the power structure. He brews his own beloved "brown party liquor" from pinecones, which is quite popular among the college "hippies" who come to purchase it, and backyard-grown marijuana, from Early.

Perhaps the grandest facet of *Squidbillies*' mythic embodiment is its willingness, with tongue firmly placed in cheek, to embrace certain pop cultural symbols emblematic of the myth. The new mythical hillbilly is not isolated from media; rather, he is hyper informed of it, particularly those elements applying to possible projections of himself — his alter ego. For example, the show is deeply informed by country music. The character of Early Cuyler is voiced by alt-country virtuoso Unheard Hinson. Instead of relying upon well-used slang clichés, Hinson often invents words and nonsensical adages for Early. He often mispronounces words containing more than two syllables, as seen here in a promotional commercial. In said commercial Early stands on his front porch, reading from a parchment:

The Industrified Resoltion and its consequential actions has inflicted upon Squidfolk—" (he falters)— "y'all have inflicted Squidfolk with unspeechable psycho-cological sufferins." (Stops to spit a flaming wad of chewing tobacco.) "Repent, technotrons, lest ye be smote and made flaccid by the sword-like fist of righteous thunder!" (Produces bottle of brown party liquor, drinks, and then closes his eyes and sings, shape note-style.) "Sunday evenings at the stroke of twelve!"

Recognizable cultural references long identified with the south are embraced with vigor. As if taking a hint from the catalogues of George Jones and Merle Haggard, many of the episode titles refer to "trouble," be it "Family Trouble" (*Squidbillies* #103) or "Chalky Trouble" (*Squidbillies* #104). References are made to north Georgia native Travis Tritt, Hank Williams, Jr., the bands Rush, 38 Special and the Doobie Brothers, and Dale Earnhardt, as a number three is proudly displayed on Early's truck. An entire episode of the second season, entitled "Swayze Crazy," explores the cultural significance of Patrick Swayze in films depicting southern culture. Early, using Swayze's character portrayals as the highest models of manhood to which Rusty should aspire, claims that "Patrick Swayze lives his life like a real man. Asses is kicked, names is taken, love is money" (*Squidbillies* #205, "Swayze Crazy").

When a legless Swayze impersonator visits their small town, the impersonator explains his missing limbs by saying: "My legs ran away to Hollywood to star in *Next of Kin II*. By way of weaving a narrative almost entirely constructed with the dregs of the popular culture — admitting that they exist, and that the public, despite the less-than-quality level of the content, remains informed by them— *Squidbillies* indulges in the same hyper irony *The Simpsons* enjoys. By way of this hyper irony, everything, most particularly well-worn stereotypes, is called into question.

The most compelling aspect of Adult Swim is the near impossibility of categorizing it as embodying exactly anything; that is, any specific aim or function other than that of entertainment. It becomes myriad things, then — social commentary without being pointedly so. Adult Swim could never be mistaken for blatant oppositional culture. In his interview with *Gelf*, however, *Squidbillies* creator Willis does admit that the original names given to Rusty and Early Cuyler were the names of his "redneck" former brother-in-law and a family cousin, during a particularly brutal divorce. He simply changed them for fear of legal retribution. Is it straying too far from the mark to argue that this could be evidence of an oppositional culture within an oppositional culture — the "normalized" Appalachian exacting revenge upon those who embrace the more banal characteristics of the idol?

The icon is here, but now he is propped up by a multimedia tome, a historical and cultural baggage from which the "traditional" hillbilly was spared. This hillbilly walks through the age of technology, aware of his own antiquity and embracing with clumsiness the new age.

Batteau (1990) asserts that "the falseness of most of the images of Appalachia hence lies not in their substance ... but in the social context of their propagation, in the manner in which their facts are presented to the audience" (p. 13). The subtext of such references changes irrevocably when a counter-reference is made; a dialogue ensues and the relationship is no longer between audience and object, but between two subjects, reacting to the other. Batteau may have an excellent point when he argues "the Appalachian region, its stock of natural resources now sadly depleted, find(s) its inventory of rituals and symbols rapidly mined for export." However, a capability of the new myth, in accordance with regional opposition, may be a heightened awareness of the prevalence of assimilation. But, this assimilation has not taken place in the predictable manner — a new argument stands as to whether the New South has adapted the culture and style of middle America, or whether a tradition of garish, intoxicating images of a wild South, filled with "rowdy friends," "broken hearts," "country boys and girls gettin down on the farm," and a mythical and god-like Boss Hogg presiding over each and every gleefully unlawful deed, have permeated the greater America. Is the country being southernized? This is a formidable argument, but only applicable to a point concerning the situation at hand. The popular Appalachia has been separated from the popular American south, deemed the weirdest neck of the woods in a very strange landscape. While the "southern" product has sold, and is selling, it appears difficult to glamorize Appalachia. A seventy-year canon of "negative press" but, more pertinently, myth-making stands in the way of this possibility.

Where *Squidbillies* treads familiar ground is in the clear distinction between the rural and the metropolitan, a perpetual conflict of the New South. The development of a specific body of Middle American ideals, ethics and moral codes coincided with what Batteau dubs the "invention of Appalachia" as "a state of mind." This new and progressive class was

largely confined to the boundaries of metropolitan or "town" settings — precursor to the shelter of suburbia, the new technology, and comforts available in proximity to one's neighbor. One no longer was separated by wide expanses of farmland or forest. In the city, very little physical mobility was required in order to reach another neighbor. The Middle American discomfort with rural terrain, and willingness to except stereotypical representations of those contained therein, could well be interpreted as a wariness of the uncontrollable element of nature. Bateau (1990) agrees, arguing that those in densely populated townships were novelty and luxury destined to become necessity to millions. "The struggle with and eventual sacrifice of an external, sensuous, vivid Nature is a projection of the Puritan's struggle to discipline an internal, sensual, polymorphous nature. The wilderness without mirrors the wildness within ... [these are] some of the most powerful symbols of American society" (p. 5).

No wonder, then, that the hillbilly image has traditionally been one with remarkably animalistic traits: an excess of body hair, snagged or enlarged teeth, and bare feet. The benign "son of the soil" remains close to nature, unencumbered by the sophistication of the outside world; conversely, the demon hillbilly's habits are close to feral, his proximity to nature rendering him less than responsible for his own uncontrollable urges. The more distinct the landscape — in this case, imposing chains of mountains concealing dark, hidden valleys — the greater the environment's propensity to shape human will.

The son of the soil, then, ostensibly finds a counterpart in the bear, the panther, or if you're Rusty Cuyler, wolves, whereas the city dweller finds his counterpart in his neighbor. The isolation of the mountains causes an inadvertent copulation with the wiles of nature. "Cultural cabin fever" becomes imminent for he who is unaware, separated from the higher man that technology represents.

Yet in their non-humanism, the Cuyler family departs further from this mythical aspect. They are neither human nor animal. They are cephalopods, and far closer to nature than any son of the soil could hope to be, as they have no spines. In fact, few of the show's primary characters are human: entrepreneur Dan Halen appears to be a chin with feet, while the Sheriff, it is revealed, is a genetically engineered product of Dan Halen Enterprises. Any affinity the characters hold for their specific culture has little to do with their physical attributes. The Appalachian myth of this program is grounded in great unreality. An important mythopoeic point of reference — overalls, floppy hat, long beard, the "traditional" cartoon hillbilly — is removed. The

New Myth, then, is reflexive of the old myth — it is entirely aware of, and free to make commentary on, its predecessor and itself. *Squidbillies* finds its power in this ability to make commentary by propelling a very real belief system into a world that is not mythical, but fantastical.

The dialogues of Early Cuyler stem from the perception that they are objects of poetic intent; that is, they embody symbols that stand for both specific histories and specific present times. Their lifestyles, and in Early's case class and race constructions, are often referred to from an outside perspective, hence the presence of a narrator in *Squidbillies*. Early Cuyler is a man (or squid) outside himself. He often seems oblivious to the fact that he is a squid. He is the poetic symbol of a comment on a symbol, reflexive of years of speculation on Appalachian manhood. Where a hokey sense of adventure once presided, a disregard for the laws of nature now resides; an appetite for devilish fun, now rampant alcoholism. The key to interpreting *Squidbillies* lies in the viewer's ability to recognize the show's reference to cultural understanding, or at least an openness to admitting that it exists. As cartoon critic M. Keith Booker (2005) observes, Adult Swim "in some ways exemplif[ies] the fragmentation of postmodernist culture." While the shorter, fifteen-minute format minimizes the opportunity for background information and a fuller plotline, it allows these programs "a brevity...an opportunity for an episode to be played out between commercial interruptions" and hence remain "less fragmented" (p. 167). This format, while seemingly tailored for a generation afflicted with a lamentably short attention span, "requires a certain amount of sophistication, and especially familiarity with television" on behalf of the viewer" (p. 169).

Adult cartooning is becoming a mainstream cottage industry. No longer restricted to "blue movie theaters" in the way many of its predecessors, such as R. Crumb's definitive "Fritz the Cat" products, it is aired on late night television and available to anyone with cable. As an underground and taboo industry, adult cartooning once embraced the baser instincts of a culture, often bordering on soft-core pornography and indulging in depictions far too violent for a "real-action" production.

Animation presents a visual fiction. What is verbalized and visualized by print media and photography is brought into hulking motion, inaccessible to any other medium by the nature of its own "drawn" reality. *Squidbillies* represents a time when, more than ever, the face of the icon has become an animal with a complex self-awareness.

The notion of high culture is a form of static. It freezes things. It jams up your head from working through something because work gets made much more organically than that. —Spiegelman (Moore, 2003, p. 14)

Cultural origin is a matter of perspective and exposure; dependent upon a) one's background and store of knowledge, which informs reaction to media, and b) exposure to preexisting media and events. Admitting this, it is all-important to acknowledge that many of the early cartoons we have discussed were once created as entertainment prior to public film screenings. Most of the Warner Brothers catalogue, particularly the popular Bugs Bunny shorts, have been made available to the mainstream audience through DVD compilations. One is no longer forced to enter the public setting in order to watch these cartoons. It is safe to say that those exposed to syndicated cable television in the past thirty years have been exposed to such cartooning from the privacy of the living room. One can now own these presentations, and bring them closer to their home experience; the cartoons play as a background to the private life.

One who is familiar with the last century's body of local color writing might compare *Squidbillies'* Early Cuyler to the Red Fox of John Fox, Jr.'s *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*. Those informed by the media canon of cartooning would compare Cuyler with the tenacious locals of *Hillbilly Hare*. The wider the exposure a vein of media is allowed, the more intellectual influence it will be granted in the zeitgeist. And the older the medium, the more it will later be informed by itself, become a comment on itself. Cartooning has become reflexive; otherwise, a series like *The Simpsons*, and certainly programming like Adult Swim cartoons, would not exist. It follows, then, that icons and images contained therein would also become reflexive.

The best argument is that the Hillbilly of the turn of the last century has endured. His existence, however, has been reconfigured by recent animation's tendency toward higher-concept forms of humor. It is the bitterness of hyper irony, its proclivity toward a humor of exclusivity in which many will indeed fail to "get the joke," which lends credence to a theory of counterargument, as far as the nature of these icons is concerned. The cynicism of hyper irony reveals a doubt in the very social systems that invented the Hillbilly in the first place.

Hyper irony — whether it works through sarcasm, topical humor or even high-concept bathroom gags (that exist aplenty in *The Simpsons*) — works to disassemble no particular cultural force. Rather, it disassembles all cultural forces by revealing power structures as largely ridiculous. Absurdity is a great distraction, but hyper irony is the ultimate in seriously funny cynicism. Evident again and again in Adult Swim productions is a genuine discreditation of cultural influences that we, as self-important viewing audience, do not believe actually touch our sensibilities. To watch a cartoon Patrick Swayze become decapitated on *Squidbillies* is to lose complete faith in films such as 1988's *Next of Kin*. In turn, *Next of Kin's* predecessors are discredited as well. Were *Deliverance* converted into the animated form and starred squids, would it still carry its cultural weight?

There have been volumes of very fine criticism published in the past twenty years that systematically debunk the myth of Appalachia as a cultural construction. Cartooning, however, can make this process easier for a very simple reason: cartoons are fun to watch. Moreover, cartoons can be multifaceted works, operating on verbal, aural and visual levels. Cartooning

brings the mythopoeic to life. Art Spiegelman, creator of the hugely popular graphic novel *Maus*, makes a formidable argument for cartooning as an informant, in his interview with *Theater* (Moore, 2003):

Some things are about perception rather than symbol manipulation ... (cartoons) work the way the brain works — in bursts of language and high-definition images ... that's why they have a certain kind of hold on us that moves past our critical defenses. Comics mix theatrical realities and musical realities, verbal realities and visual realities. They are able to make a very complex *gesamtkunstwerk* — one that's often very taboo (pp. 18-19).

Animation, because it inhabits a world of semi-live action, toes a line between fantastical substance and active influence. The figures move and function across the screen, creating a path for the eye to follow. Spiegelman (Moore, 2003) admits that dismissing media as juvenile fare is a mistake; the forces at work in animation are complex and consuming. "Animation resolves itself very quickly. For kids that's a great help, although these cartoons are now seen as pernicious, not suitable for kids. They're not available in prime kid viewing hours," he contends. "We project things onto kids in order to protect ourselves. Those Daffy Duck cartoons are potent. We'd rather have dopey bland stuff around for ourselves and our kids deal with that fireball of energy that comes from vital work" (p. 20). There is a reason why Warner Brothers was contracted to make a series of instructional shorts for the U.S Navy during World War II. Cartoons require an audience to look, listen, and pay heed without having to spoon-feed information.

It is the non-reality of the cartoon that holds our attention so closely. It is a broken mirror to which we can hold social systems. The image we receive is a distorted one in which issues, seemingly pithy in the everyday, are magnified and given close-range inspection. Having been a cartoon regardless for decades prior to his animated debut, the hillbilly has found his best home in cartooning.

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